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ABSTRACT

This publication describes the creation of a new school building for James F. Oyster Bilingual Elementary School in Washington, DC. Despite the success of its academic program, the school's 70-year-old building had become unsafe and unsuitable for teaching and learning and was threatened with closure in 1993 because of the district's fiscal crisis. This publication discusses how the 21st Century School Fund, working with the Oyster Community Council (the school's PTA), the local school restructuring team, the principal, and neighborhood residents, formed a public-private partnership that saved the school and increased city revenue. The District of Columbia agreed to divide the school property in half to make room for a new school and a new residential development. They also agreed to dedicate property taxes and revenue from the sale of the land to repay a revenue bond. In exchange, LCOR, the private developer of the new 211-unit apartment building, agreed to design and build a new school and repay the Oyster revenue bond. (EV)

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building outside the box

Public private partnership: A strategy for improved public school buildings

Full text available at:
http://www.21csf.org/csf-home/Oyster/oyster.htm

21st Century School Fund

In an urban neighborhood a short walk from the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., there is a public elementary school with a reputation for academic excellence.

The 350 students at the James F. Oyster Bilingual Elementary School speak, read, write and test well in English and Spanish. The internationally recognized bilingual program draws long lines of parents from outside the neighborhood eager to enroll their children. Long-time residents and recent immigrants alike choose this school for their children to learn together. The school pulses with the voices of many languages and cultures — echoes of its diversity. A dedicated principal, teachers, staff members, active parents and a supportive community make possible each student's success.

Yet in the 1990s, this vibrant school came close to closing its doors forever. After seven decades of service, the school building itself was worn out — unsafe and unsuitable for teaching and learning.

Because of a fiscal crisis, District of Columbia Public School officials considered closing the James F. Oyster Bilingual Elementary School. Instead, a fine new school with a gracious cupola continues to anchor a neighborhood corner — the first new school in the district in 20 years. A new apartment building, the Henry Adams House, stands in its shadow. Together, they are living proof of what an organized community can achieve.

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From left to right: New Oyster Bilingual Elementary School; gymnasium; early childhood classroom; and Oyster students enjoy their new school.

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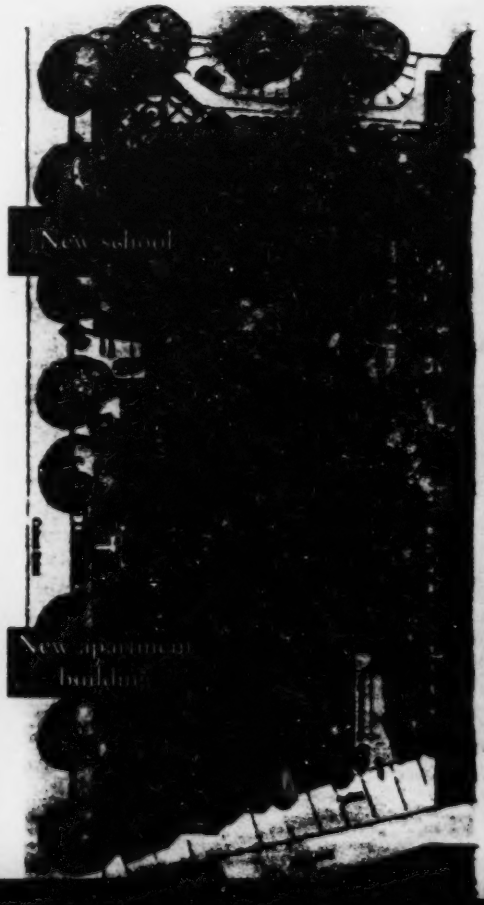
The 21st Century School Fund, working with the Oyster Community Council (OCC, the school's PTA), the Local School Restructuring Team, then principal Paquita Holland and neighborhood residents, found a creative solution — a public-private partnership among the community, the government and the private sector — that saved the school and increased city revenue. The District of Columbia agreed to divide the school property in half to make room for a new school and a new residential development. They also agreed to dedicate property taxes and revenue from the sale of the land to repay a revenue bond. In exchange, LCOR, the private developer of the new 211-unit apartment building, agreed to design and build a new school — and pay $804,000 a year for 35 years to repay the $11 million Oyster revenue bond.

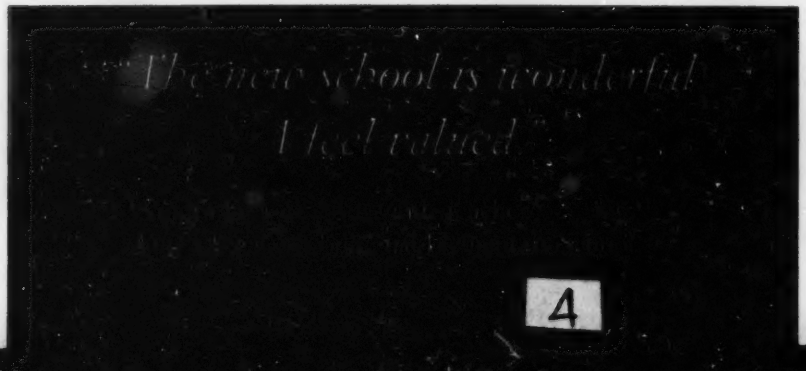
This solution is unusual — but can be repeated in other urban communities.

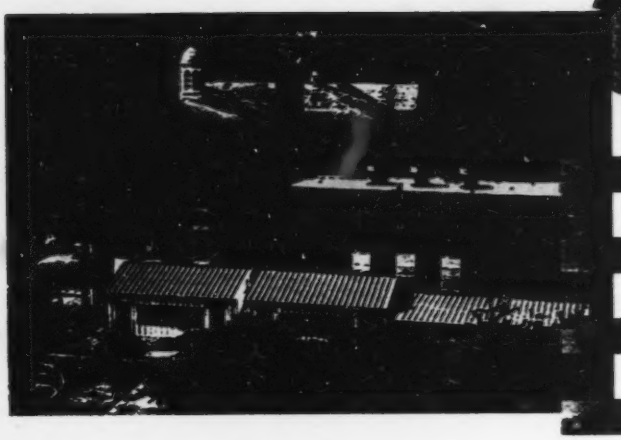
Building a better education

Even before the district's school system proposed closing Oyster School in 1993, the Oyster Community Council had been trying for years to improve the learning environment for the children.

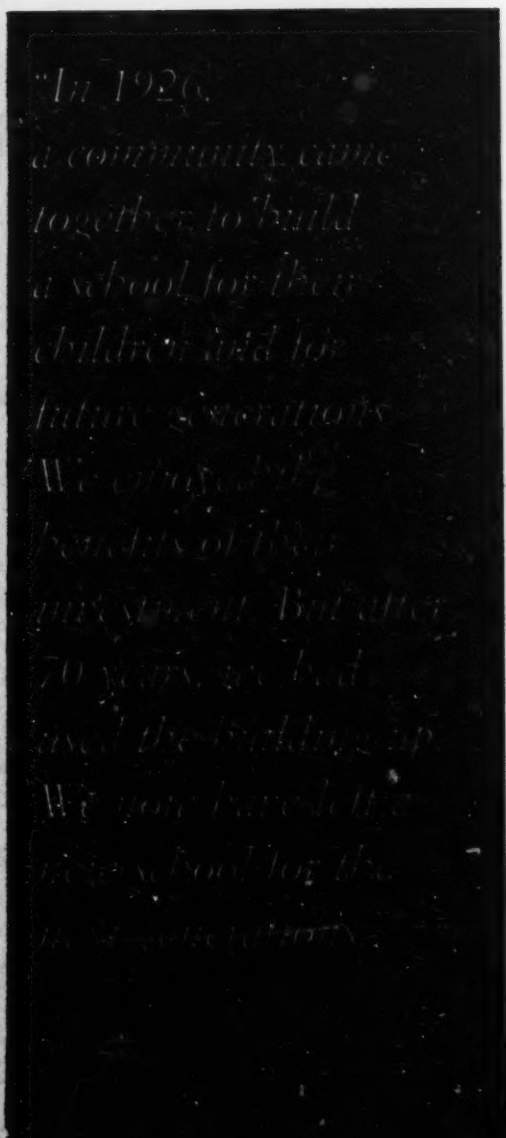
Originally built in 1926, the once-handsome school had deteriorated into a building poorly suited to the bilingual program that is the academic heart of the school. With the exception of classroom teaching, all school activities took place in makeshift spaces. The library was a converted classroom with limited shelf space and no computer hookups. A single public area functioned as the gymnasium, auditorium, cafeteria, office for after-school







	Old Building	New Building
Enrollment	300 students	350 students
Building size	26,591 sq. ft.	47,984 sq. ft.
Site size	1.67 acres	0.79 acres
Average classroom size	725 sq. ft.	900 sq. ft.
Library/Media center	900 sq. ft.	2,100 sq. ft.
Multipurpose room	2,400 sq. ft.	3,750 sq. ft.
Gymnasium	None	3,700 sq. ft.
Art room	900 sq. ft.	1,200 sq. ft.
Music room	None	950 sq. ft.
Parking	14 surface	33 underground
Outdoor play area	18,000 sq. ft.	8,000 sq. ft.



programs and storage space. The counselor's office was once a cloakroom. Even the "temporary" classrooms that housed an overflow of students outside the school building were battered from 20 years of use.

The crumbling facility cut into learning time in measurable ways. Three times, city and school officials shut down the school for fire and building code violations. The roof leaked with every rain. Students and teachers spent valuable time lining up and waiting to use restrooms and drinking fountains, which were few in number and far from classrooms. Dual language classes in English and Spanish were held in confined classroom spaces. One little girl occasionally hid in a cloakroom, saying, "Mommy, I just can't stand the noise."

Despite a strong academic program and a committed community, the school building itself was compromising high-quality education, straining teachers and diminishing students' opportunities to learn. The closing proposal galvanized the local school community to mobilize for the sake of their children's education.

Building partnerships in your community

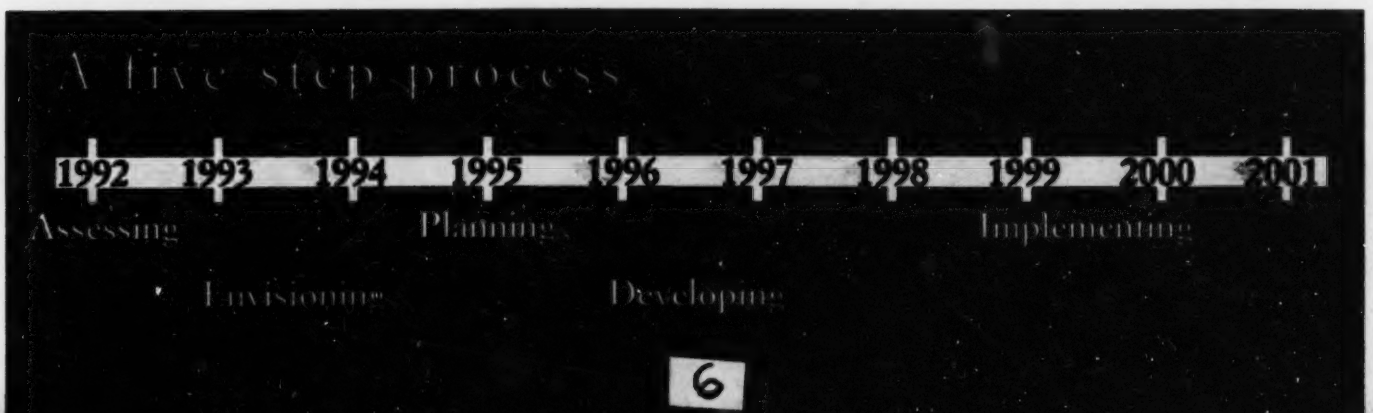
The Oyster Community Council and the school principal formed a blueprint committee to study the school's physical deficiencies and make recommendations to address them. But the obvious solution — renovating or rebuilding — was impossible in the nation's capital, where neither the city nor the school district had any school construction funds. The district also lacked plans for improving or replacing its deteriorating facilities.

Nevertheless, the local school community persevered. Knowing that other communities regularly finance, design and build new schools, they made it their business to figure out how to do it in their neighborhood. They realized that they would need an unconventional solution — a way to build a new school with no new public dollars.

Clearly, this effort would take time and expertise from skilled professionals. So Mary Filardo, an Oyster parent with community organizing and construction experience, founded the 21st Century School Fund (21CSF) in 1994 to keep the community vision alive, develop project milestones, and manage and monitor every detail.

For nine months, the school community explored its options. During this time, Sarah Woodhead, a parent architect, worked with 21CSF, the principal, parents and teachers to define the educational facilities needs for the Oyster school program. In the process, parents and teachers grew more comfortable talking together about teaching and learning. Parents also worked with the Woodley Park Community Association and area residents, many of whom did not have children in the school — but they cared deeply about their neighborhood.

Equally important, the local school community, supported by 21CSF, forged



From left to right: **Oyster school students, parents and neighbors** at the December 1999 groundbreaking. **Leadership**: Dwight Singleton, board of education representative; Mary Filardo, executive director, 21CSF; Paul Vance, superintendent, District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS); William Hard, executive vice president, LCOR; Paquita Holland, former principal, Oyster school; Kevin Chavous, council member, District of Columbia. **Technical support**: Jim Wilson, JFW, Inc.; Terry Hernson, DCPS; Jim Turner, LCOR; Mike McShea, The Staubach Company; Richard Gross, Esq., Property Funding Group.

a partnership with the District of Columbia Public Schools. Together, representatives of the superintendent and the community regularly appeared before the school board and city council. Their diligence and cooperation were rewarded. With the community and school system clearly behind the project, the board of education, city council and mayor supported the partnership at key points in the process.

Sustaining the project with a cooperative effort

Turning the vision of a new school into a finished building is an enormous, long-term undertaking. In this case, it took almost nine years. Only through the combined and sustained efforts of the principal, teachers, parents, neighbors, the school system, committed public officials, the private sector and 21CSF did the project come to completion. The project survived many political changes — three mayors, four superintendents, four school district governance structures and seven project managers.

Given that turnover, the new school would never have opened its doors in 2001 without sustained support from 21CSF and the Ford Foundation. The Ford Foundation contributed startup funding and ongoing support to 21CSF, which paid for technical assistance in planning, project management, design and community engagement and leveraged funding for the $11 million construction project.

Creating a development partnership requires expertise — in financing,

"This project shows what is possible when the school district, the city, the community, nonprofits and the private sector cooperate on behalf of public education."

— Paul Vance, Superintendent
District of Columbia Public Schools

legal affairs, real estate, architecture and more. Finding this talent in an urban community is not difficult. 21CSF discovered that professionals were more than willing to donate their time and expertise to a project that benefits their community and public school students.

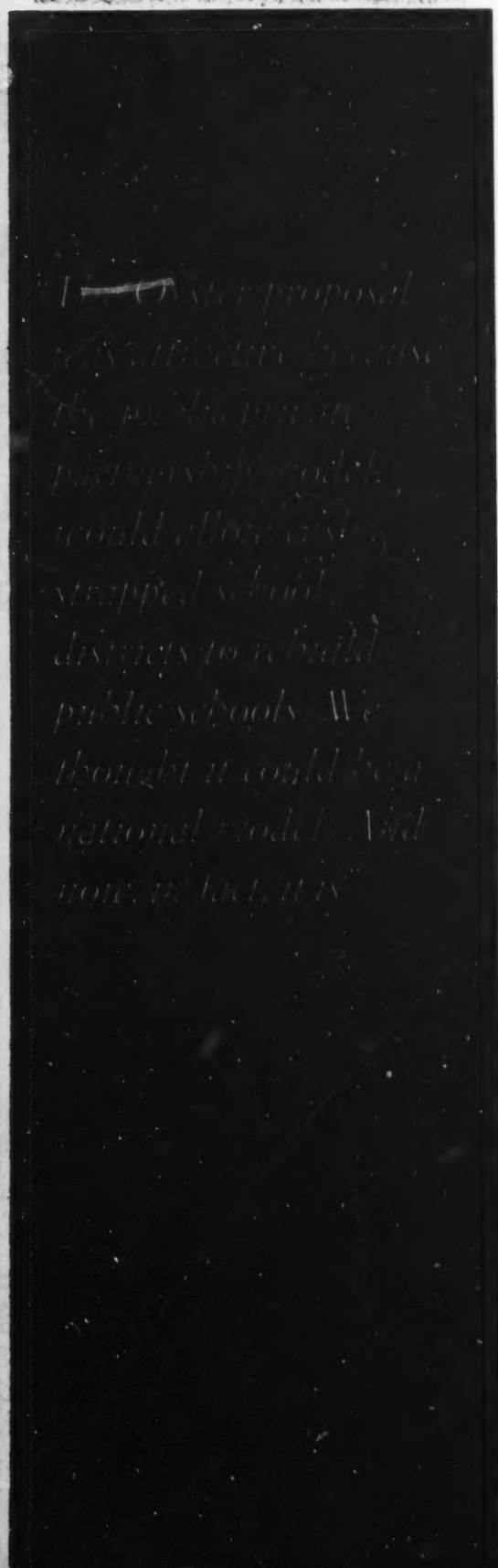
Once the partnership was formed, LCOR, the developer, managed the design and construction of the new school. The architect, Jacobs Facilities, Inc., engineers and building contractors worked diligently to turn the Oyster vision into reality. Design began in 1998, the groundbreaking occurred in December 1999 and the new school was finished in June 2001.

Lasting effects: A national model for improving school facilities

Across the nation, thousands of public schools need to be repaired, replaced, modernized or constructed. The estimated cost ranges from $127 billion to $355 billion, but the lack of significant funding and capacity within the public sector make it likely that many schools will sink further into physical neglect. At the same time, expectations for student achievement and teacher quality continue to rise. Communities must come together to provide high-quality school buildings for teachers to teach and students to learn.

The Oyster School story is unique — but it doesn't have to be. In Washington, D.C., the story likely will be repeated. 21CSF has worked with the District of Columbia Public Schools to create a framework for other public-private development partnerships. Oyster's story also can serve as a model for other communities throughout the country to fix or rebuild their neighborhood schools.

From left to right: new music room; lunchroom; children's artwork; and library.



The 21st Century School Fund (21CSF) was founded in 1994 to help communities create healthy, safe and educationally appropriate learning environments. 21CSF works to build the public will and capacity to improve urban public school facilities. This mission is grounded in a broader vision that good public schools should be both a reasonable expectation and a reality.

To learn more, visit www.21csf.org, e-mail info@21csf.org or call 202-745-3745. To learn more about the five-step process for improving public schools, contact 21CSF to order *For Generations to Come: A Guide to Community Leadership for Renewing Public School Buildings.*

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